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ABSTRACT

The extent to which the middle school becomes a true educational alternative is directly related to the ability of middle school educators and researchers to identify and investigate the developmental needs and learning capacities of students. Three important developmental characteristics of early adolescents are a high need for peer friendships, a rising awareness of increased physical changes, and a strong concern with how they match up to common behavioral or physical stereotypes. The middle school student also has several important learner characteristics: the ability to organize knowledge and concepts into problem-solving strategies, interest in planning his or her own learning experiences, and a value system that is shifting from the influence of elders to the influence of peers. The teacher must be aware of the developmental and learning characteristics of the middle schooler and design learning experiences functional to the learner. Teachers must not attempt to compete with students' friends or with powerful influences such as the media. Learning must include the preadolescents' need for social contact. Teachers must present educationally and environmentally relevant issues. The challenge to American educators is forcefully presented by the early adolescent. (Author/JM)

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DEVELOPMENTAL CHARACTERISTICS OF MIDDLE SCHOOLERS AND MIDDLE SCHOOL ORGANIZATION

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DEVELOPMENTAL CHARACTERISTICS OF MIDDLE SCHOOLERS AND MIDDLE SCHOOL ORGANIZATION

The developmental and learning characteristics of early adolescents who find themselves in middle schools is an aspect of this new school structure configuration which has consistantly been overlooked. The thesis of my paper, therefore, focuses on the individual rather than the school itself. Within this unique middle school organization is an even more unique early adolescent.

There is one somewhat philosophical statement which underlies my persuasions about the middle school student and his/her relationship to the educational process. The extent to which the middle school becomes a viable educational alternative to traditional school models is directly proportional to the ability of middle school educators and researchers to identify and investigate the developmental needs and learning capacities of the students which it serves (Thornburg, 1979b).

1. The nature of human development. What are the characteristics of preadolescents and how do they interface with the school? There is no theory as to how these individuals are changing. They get "tacked on" to the end of childhood theories or to the beginning of adolescent theories, but this is inadequate. By viewing human development as a continuous process across the life span, it is easy to see that there are no clearly demarcated events which characterize entrance into an exit from this pre-adolescent developmental period. The elusiveness of such well-defined

characteristics may become a source of challenge or discouragement. Early adolescents are a large, distinctive group. Clearly the task is a more demanding one than isolating the characteristics of children or adolescents.

I should like to discuss some characteristics of early adolescents, I hope, in light of the contemporary educational and social environments. These characteristics exist primarily because of the ways in which they developmentally unfold, although they are affected by the environment.

An important aspect of development is developing friendships with others (Thornburg, 1970). In contrast to the eighth and ninth years of life where children typically have a low need for social interaction, the gradual emergence of peers is vitally important to 10- to 15-year-olds. Their curious and exploratory nature manifests itself socially as well. Peer group formations are usually initiated among friends of the same sex (Dunphy, 1963). Learning to accept and be acceptable to others is of vital importance. There is security in same sex companionship at 10 to 12 compared to the opposite sex companionship in later development. They have learned over the years that friends are important and what were tentative friendships in the primary grades take on more solidarity by the middle school age.

Research is rather sketchy as to when and under what conditions early adolescents make the transition from same sex to opposite sex participation. The trend has been down from ages 14-15 to 12-13 within the past decade (Thornburg and Gould, 1980). This correlates with increased emphasis on physical maturation and social pressure to be involved in adolescent like activities as a pre-adolescent. Studies on pre-teen drug use, sexual

behavior, female pregnancy, runaways, and delinquency provide increasing insight into the behavioral world of the early adolescent, most of which is reciprocated by one's friends (Cottle, 1979; Diepold and Young, 1979; Levin and Kozak, 1979; Moore, Hofferth, and Wertheimer, 1979; Redican, Olsen, Stone, and Wilson, 1979).

A second developmental characteristic is <u>becoming aware of increased physical changes</u> (Thornburg, 1970). Primarily as a result of better nutrition and general health the age of adolescent developmental maturity has moved into the pre-teen years (Peterson, 1979). Girls begin their growth spurt around age 10; boys some 12 to 18 months later (Tanner, 1973). Both are within the traditional elementary school years.

The female begins breast development in her tenth year, experiences considerable genital growth in her eleventh year, and begins to menstrate in her twelfth year (12.8) (Hammer & Ownes, 1973; Sommers, 1978). Virtually all females by 15 are experiencing menarche regardless of ethnicity or socioeconomic status (MacMahon, 1970).

Male heighth, genital growth, and involuntary erections all begin around age 12. These growth processes continue for approximately three years during which all secondary sex characteristics emerge (Tanner, 1962). Thus, while the male is less developed than his female counterpart throughout the middle school years, his maturity is comparable by 16. Anxiety often accompanies physical growth, especially given the opportunity to compare personal growth with classmates and comparing oneself to existing social sterotypes.

Many pre-adolescent behaviors seem to be heavily attributed to stereotypy. Bring stereotypical is a 13-letter word--or is it? The pervasiveness of

images in American society is something with which all people of all ages must constantly contend. For the middle schooler this stereotypy is a viable attachement since these young girls and boys are changing in so many ways and must use others and images as their criteria for evaluating personal change. Research on physical attractiveness indicates that early adolescents are very concerned about their appearance (Adams, 1977; Lerner, Orlos, & Knapp, 1976). Boys identify stongly with the masculine (mesomorphic) look which is characterized by their height, shoulder width, and body proportions. Girls express concern over the shape of hips, legs, breast, and waist. The prevalence of athletic events, beauty contest, and media productions which stress beauty, manliness, and "sexiness" help our emerging adolescents plug into sterotypes. Recent research (Thomsen, 1980) on television viewing habits of middle schoolers indicates that sterotypes play an important role in program selection. The external environment often capitalizes on the vulnerability of early adolescents, sometimes to their betterment and sometimes to their detriment.

Learner Characteristics

One important developmental ability the learner has is to organize knowledge and concepts into problem solving strategies (Thornburg, 1974). The pre-teen falls within Piaget's concrete and formal operations stages (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958). The concrete stage is a very conceptual stage where the early adolescent organizes information around categories or concepts which are generalizable form one instance to another. The formal stage is not characterized only by abstract throught. In addition, it utilizes the components of logic and reasoning in making decisions. This process is the beginning of the type of thought process which exists in

most adults.

The developmental aspects of these two stages can be enhanced within the middle school environment. Learning experiences can be structured for youth so that there is an easier transition into the advanced stages of thought. By grades five and six, information is ordered, organized, and structured within the mind. By grades seven and eight deductive reasoning and reflective thinking are operating, thus lending greater flexibility to the earlier thought processes.

Another important characteristic is that pre-teens show interest in planning many of their own learning experiences (Thornburg, 1979a) in being self-directive. They have inquiring minds which causes them to go beyond many ideas presented in class and into many personal interest areas. Teachers and the curriculum should have enough flexibility to let students explore personal academic interests at various times. This statement should not be interpreted to mean that the teacher should abdicate responsiblity for directing learning in lieu of the student's rights to be self-directed. I should hope, however, that it comes to mean greater flexibility, greater awareness of the value of student input, and greater willingness to structure teaching-learning activities within the context of the learner's natural environoment(Thornburg, 1979b).

The emerging value system of the pre-teen is the third learner characteristic I wish to discuss (Thornburg, 1970). Throughout the first eight years of life a child's primary value source is his/her parents (Thornburg, 1973). Values are represented through moral teaching such as the concepts of right or wrong and good or bad. Even when the child begins school, parents remain more dominant than teachers in value teaching (Hoffman, 1980).

During early-adolescence there is a shift from parents being the predominant influnece on behavior to peers becoming this predominant influence (Thornburg and Gould, 1980). This sets in motion the likelihood that many parents, teachers, and other adults will be challenged in some of their moral and value teachings. Pre-teens will identify discrepancies between their parents and themselves. They will ask why a behavior, such as profanity, is acceptable for the parent but not the child. They are not as likely to accept the explanation "because parents are older," as may have been true in previous generations. They will wonder why teachers favor some students and pick on others. Then their friends will be their greatest sympathizers in the process of trying to unscramble the discrepancies. Indeed, this is the way in which moral development change occurs.

The impact of individuality within the society throughout the 1970s has been rendered literally by many pre-teens to mean "no one has the right to tell them what to do." This belief has been reinforced by older adolescents, some parents and teachers, and by the media. The question is not whether or not an individual has rights but whether we can get a person to explore personal rights within a larger framework, namely, individual rights accompanied by individual responsibility. In a real sense adults, and society have done children and youth an injustice by failing to teach them the reciprocal elements of rights and responsibility. Thus, within contemporary society, we are faced with the harsh reality that preadolescents are being pressured, sometimes enticed, into behaviors prior to their social and emotional readiness for them. There are multitudinous opportunities for pre-adolescents to hear of and carry out the idea of individuality. The critical issue in the middle school is to teach the corollary elements so that the basis upon which pre-teens can make value judgments and act upon them is complete.

In my opinion the learning characteristics of the early adolescent, the conduciveness of the middle school to maximize learning, and the instructional effectiveness of the teacher have not yet come into functional synchronization. In effect, the school environment is still not conducive enough to positive growth for these youngsters. It is true that as educators we are more aware of the changing nature of these youngsters. It is also true that the middle school is a partial answer to past educational inadequacies. Still, it is not enough. There are 23 different school organizational configurations which accommodate students in grades 5 through 9. We are not even close to determining which, if any, structures best meet the needs of students. In addition, teacher training programs and state licensing requirements for middle school/junior high teachers are dismal at best. We must do something about these limitations.

Teacher Characteristics

As our information base on early adolescence continues to increase, it is essential for the effective teacher to keep him/herself abreast of what is happening. What this requires is involvement with pre-teens. If teachers dislike their jobs, are negative with students, or are too routine in their classroom teaching, the effect on students will be negative, thus interfering with effective teacher/student interaction. With childhood stability breaking up, early-adolescents need positive teachers who can guide them into new learning experiences.

The teacher must remember that learning must be functional to the student (Thornburg, 1979b). Student interest in academic learning is directly related to how useful the student thinks learning is. Here I must underscore

the concept of relevance. If the teacher "stresses things students already know, could care less about, or that are so removed from the student's immediate life that they have no relevance, most students will disregard such teaching (Thornburg, 1979a p. 78)."

Teachers must not actively compete with student's friends or with powerful external influences such as the media. No matter what a teacher does, he/she will never be as popular or well-liked by any single student as much as that student's friends. This is neither demeaning nor uncomplimentary to the teacher. Rather, it is the recognition that within the school environment the perceptual world of teachers and students are significantly different. A student needs both--other students and teacher. The professional role of the teacher can promote reciprocal respect which should not be violated by teachers over-identifying with students.

The average middle school student spends six hours a day watching television (Shinn and Burpeau, 1980; Srygley, 1978). Programs and advertisements are geared to the interests and energies of pre-teens in a way so powerful and influential that the critics are coming out of the woodwork. Its effects are unknown, yet speculation is that it not only promotes violence and insolence in pre-teens but actually affects the child's ability to think and be active (Stevenson, 1980). Some writers have asserted that extensive television viewing may retard the development of problem-solving skills and promote mediocrity of thought (Hartman, 1978; Hornik, 1978).

Learning must include understanding social contact and responsibility (Thornburg, 1979b). It is important that teachers be aware of the importance of pre-adolescents having friends. Perhaps some teachers perceive this as a potential problem within the classroom rather than the normal development of

of social skills. An aspect of effective instruction includes helping students learn how to make friends and get along with others. Teachers should not see such companionship as a threat to classroom order or management. It simply is not true that kids always cause trouble or do unacceptable things when they get together. Teachers should support groups of early adolescents as well as the individual person.

Teachers generally fail to take a contemporary stance when ascertaining the needs of early adolescents. Social behaviors and the pressure to be involved in them is more intense now than ever before in our society. As professionals we cannot take either "the good old days" not the "immoral, degenerate" stance. We must recognize that society is different and early adolescents have been socialized differently. The more we are aware of the multiple decisions and dilemmas young adolescents have to encounter, the greater the likelihood that we can help them make appropriate decisions.

Teachers must present educationally and environmentally relevant issues. There is little question but that most curricula is outdated. Contemporary social issues must increasingly become a relevant part of the school days. How to make socially correct and responsible responses to situations encountered in daily living is very important. Learning must be extended into the students natural environment. We cannot continue to take the chance of students turning us off. The middle school must respond to students needs.

The ideas I have discussed are vital if we are to meet the needs of our pre-teens within the school environment. The needs are not always evident, nor the strategies to resolve such needs. However, the emerging adolescent is so potentially dynamic that our energies, without question, are warranted.

It could be that the combined energies of the developing adolescent set in motion behavioral tendencies which are stimulated through physical growth, social awareness, and peer pressure. The instability fosters insecurity, thus the pre-teen acts out to find security and sameness, important components of the early adolescent's identity process. Early adolescents are growing up faster socially and psychologically. Their reference groups are changing (Garbarino, Burston, Raber, Russell, and Crouter, 1978); they are moving from elementary to middle schools; their self-concepts and self-esteem temporarily lower (Blyth, Simmons and Bush, 1978); they show much preoccupation with self (Elkind and Bowen, 1979; Thornburg and Thornburg, 1980); they increase their peer interests (Gould and Thornburg, 1980; Thornburg and Gould, 1980); and their behavioral range is as great as in adolescence as is manifested by the extent of pro- and anti-social activities in which they are involved. Indeed, the challenge to American educators has been forcefully presented by the early adolescents.

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